

Scripture: Romans 5:1—8

Subject: God ordains that we suffer for the gospel and for the cause of righteousness because of the moral and spiritual effects that it has on us.

Introduction

The Bible has a great deal to say about suffering and most of it is encouraging. The prevailing religious mood is not favorable to the doctrine, but anything that gets as much space as the doctrine of suffering gets in the Scriptures should certainly receive careful and reverent attention from the sons of the new creation. We cannot afford to neglect it, for whether we understand it or not we are going to experience some suffering. As human beings we cannot escape it.¹

So says A.W. Tozer. According to the *Center for the Study of Global Christianity* at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, figures as of 2010 estimate that “An average of **159,960** Christians worldwide are martyred for their faith per year.”² While figures vary widely, it seems as though more and more Christians worldwide are suffering for their faith. What role does suffering play in the Christian life? Is there a reason for it? And should we be worried that we don’t suffer enough? Says one author:

In a society dominated by consumerism, the Church has ...been infiltrated by a theology of “it’s all about me” and “what do I get”robed in nice and warm scriptures focused on “bless me”. We have ... conditioned our members to measure God’s goodness with “how good things are for us”. This impacts our missiology as well. Often times, the primary motivation to get people saved is “their happiness and prosperity”. As such, even our preaching in evangelism is often dominated by the “what you will get” theology. In such a “me-centred” theology, is it really a surprise that the Theology of Suffering is a MISSING THEOLOGY? Today, the Theology of Suffering is often confined to our historical books or some ... “far away Peoples” ...³

In parts of our world, many of our brothers and sisters are suffering intensely. Plainly, we are not. Yet. But the times, they are indeed changing:

In 2006, a Canadian evangelist in Alberta was arraigned on charges of "obstruction of justice, trespassing and disturbing the peace" during a theater festival where he preached and spoke with tarot card readers and other occult practitioners. 33-year-old Artur Pawlowski, who gave up a lucrative home-building business to start up The Street Church for especially homeless people, was detained ...when he and several others prayed and read the Bible near the Fringe Festival in Calgary, Alberta's largest city, fellow Christians said.⁴

American preacher Tony Miano, a retired Los Angeles County Sheriff, was arrested outside the Wimbledon tennis courts in July after a passer-by told the police he had made homophobic remarks when in fact he was reading from the books of Thessalonians. [In September] according to Christian Concern, Rev Josh Williamson, the pastor of Craigie Reformed Baptist Church in Perth, Scotland, was arrested for “breach of the peace.” Williamson regularly takes to the streets to hand out leaflets... and do open-air preaching. But on this occasion a police officer told him to stop preaching because he was breaking the law. When Rev. Williamson asked the officer what law he was breaking, he replied that Williamson was in “breach of the peace.” Rev. Williamson was taken to Perth police

1 Tozer, A. W. (1986). *The root of the righteous*. (p. 151). Camp Hill, PA.: WingSpread.

2 <http://christianity.about.com/od/denominations/p/christiantoday.htm>

3 Kumar, B. "Missions in the Context of Suffering." <http://www.ethne.net/featured/missions-in-the-context-of-suffering>

4 <http://www.worthynews.com/1081-canada-evangelist-arrested-for-preaching-near-festival>

station, interviewed and released with a caution. A second man, who spoke up in defence of Rev. Williamson's right to preach, was also arrested at the scene.⁵

The Cost of the Great Commission

There is a cost in serving Christ and fulfilling the Great Commission, and ready-or-not, *being* a Christian is going to cost more in the years to come. But the cost of reaching our world has always been there. Eighteen hundred years ago Tertullian said, "*We [Christians] multiply whenever we are mown down by you; the blood of Christians is seed*" (*Apologeticus*, 50). And 200 years later St. Jerome said, "*The Church of Christ has been founded by shedding its own blood, not that of others; by enduring outrage, not by inflicting it. Persecutions have made it grow; martyrdoms have crowned it*" (Letter 82).

God's perspective on missions is that it must be done, and He never meant it to be easy or safe. Jesus plainly warned us:

"They will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death; and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake" (Matthew 24:9). "If they persecuted me they will persecute you" (John 15:20).

Until we recover God's perspective on suffering and the spread of the gospel, we will not rejoice in the triumphs of grace that he plans.

Brother Andrew tells the story of sitting in Budapest, Hungary in 1990, teaching a dozen pastors of that city from the Bible. In walked a pastor from Romania who had recently been released from prison. Brother Andrew said that he stopped teaching and knew that it was time to listen.

... the Romanian pastor said, "Andrew, are there any pastors in prison in Holland?" "No," he replied. "Why not?" the pastor asked. Brother Andrew thought for a moment and said, "I think it must be because we do not take advantage of all the opportunities God gives us."

Then came the most difficult question. "Andrew, what do you do with **2 Tim 3:12**?" Brother Andrew opened his Bible and turned to the text and read aloud, "*All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*" He closed the Bible slowly and said, "Brother, please forgive me. We do nothing with that verse."

We have, I fear, domesticated the concept of godliness into such inoffensive middle class morality and law-keeping that 2 Timothy 3:12 has become unintelligible to us. I think many of us are not prepared to suffer for the gospel. And that is why I feel called to take four weeks dealing with what the Bible says about this and what God is calling us to today.

Four Biblical Purposes of Suffering

In November, we are going to examine *four purposes of suffering*, because it is clearly God's purpose that we suffer for righteousness' sake and for the sake of the gospel:

1. **The Moral Purpose**, because suffering refines our holiness and hope ([Romans 5:1-8](#)),
2. **The Intimacy Purpose**: because in suffering our relationship with Christ becomes deeper and sweeter ([Philippians 3:7-14](#))
3. **The Missions Purpose**: because God calls us to complete Christ's afflictions as we extend the worth of his through the reality of ours ([Colossians 1:24](#))
4. **The Glory Purpose**: because this slight, momentary affliction is working for us an eternal weight of glory ([2 Corinthians 4:16-18](#)).

⁵ <http://canadafreepress.com/index.php/article/58073>

Today we focus on **The Moral Purpose** (or Spiritual Purpose) of suffering. **GOD ORDAINS THAT WE SUFFER FOR THE GOSPEL AND FOR THE CAUSE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS BECAUSE OF THE MORAL AND SPIRITUAL EFFECTS THAT IT HAS ON US.**

One of the great texts on this point is [Romans 5:3–4](#).

After showing that we are *justified by faith* and that we have **access** through Jesus *into grace* and that we *stand in grace*, Paul says in verse [2](#) that we Christians “*exult in hope of the glory of God*.” The chief cause of joy in the Christian life is the eager expectation that we will see and share in the glory of God. **Hope for God’s glory is the heart of our gladness.**

Now if that is true, then Paul is perfectly consistent to go on and say in verses 3 and 4 that we will also exult in the things that make our hope increase. That’s the line of reasoning here: we start with the hope of the glory of God at the end of verse 2 and then we end with hope at the end of verse 4. The point is: **if we exult in hope, we will exult in what brings about hope**. So verses [3](#) and [4](#) describe what that is.

“And not only this [**not only do we exult in the hope of the glory of God**], but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulations bring about perseverance; and perseverance [brings about] proven character [**a sense of being approved**]; and proven character [brings about] hope.”

So the reason we exult in tribulations is not because we like pain or misery or discomfort or trouble (we are not masochists), but because tribulations produce what we do like, namely, a stronger and stronger sense of hope which comes through the experience of patient perseverance and a sense of being approved.

God Has a Purpose in the Sufferings of His People

So the main lesson here is that **God has a purpose in the sufferings of his people**. And that purpose is often different from the ministry goal they are laboring in. The ministry goal might be to evangelize Kitchener’s unchurched singles, or suburban professionals, or Egyptian Muslims. **But God’s purpose might be to produce more hope in the ministers and missionaries by putting them in prison.**

In other words God may not go about ministry productivity and efficiency at all the way we would. Again and again Paul had to reckon with **the strange work of God** in his imprisonments and beatings and shipwrecks and broken plans. How could God be so inefficient as to let his mission be blocked like this again and again? One key answer would be: **God is committed to increasing the hope and holiness of his people in the process of reaching the lost**. And only God knows how to balance those two things and bring them to pass in the best way.

Three Effects of Afflictions

There are three specific effects of afflictions mentioned in verses [3](#) and [4](#).

1. Perseverance

First, tribulations bring about perseverance, or patient endurance. Paul doesn’t mean this is universally true. For many, tribulations unleash hatred and bitterness and anger and resentment and murmuring. But this is not the ongoing effect in those who have *the Spirit of Christ*. For them the effect is patient endurance, because the fruit of the Spirit is patience.

The point here is that until hardship comes into our lives, especially **hardship for the sake of Christ and his righteousness**, we do not experience *the extent and depth of our devotion* to Christ. Until times get hard, we do not taste and really know if we are fair-weather Christians—the kind Jesus described in the parable of the soils in [Mark 4:16–17](#).

And these are the ones sown upon rocky ground, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; and they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.

So Paul is saying that one great effect of tribulation is that it brings about patient endurance and perseverance in God's people, **so they can see the faithfulness of God in their lives and know that they are truly his**.

2. Proven Character

That's the point of the second effect that's mentioned (v. 4). "*And [this] perseverance [brings about] proven character.*" Literally the word **dokimen** means **"the experience of being tested and approved."** We might say "approvedness" or "provenness."

This is not hard to grasp. If, when tribulations come, you persevere in devotion to Christ and don't turn against him, then you come out of that experience with a stronger sense that you are real, you are proven, you are not a hypocrite. Your fidelity and loyalty were put to the test and they passed. Now they have a "proven character." The gold of your faith was put in the fire and it came out *refined*, not *consumed*.

That's the second effect of affliction: the proving and refining of the gold of our allegiance to Jesus. Perseverance brings about the assurance of provenness.

3. Hope

The third effect comes from this sense of being tested and approved and refined. Verse 4: **"And proven character [brings about] hope."** This takes us back to verse 2: **"We exult in the hope of the glory of God."** The Christian life begins with hope in the promises of God in the gospel, and it spirals up through affliction to more and more hope.

When we have been **tested and approved**, that brings about *more hope* because hope grows when **we discover our authenticity through testing**. The people who know God best are the people who have suffered with Christ. The people who are most unwavering in their hope are those who have been tested most deeply. Those who look steadfastly and eagerly to *the hope of glory* are those who have gone through tribulations.

Conclusion

One author writes:

The Western, consumer-driven culture is designed around satisfying our every desire and avoiding suffering. This is probably why some in the West have developed a "health, wealth and prosperity" theology but not a theology of suffering. We are taught to live for the things of this world, and this has infected our churches. But when we come to faith in Christ, we receive a new master who has called us to be on mission with Him, and faithfulness to that mission will involve suffering.⁶

6 <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/does-god-have-a-purpose-for-our-suffering>

Suffering for the sake of Christ and the Gospel is not a remote possibility, it is not something to be avoided, it is part-and-parcel of being His disciples.

Indeed, the first thing we discover about suffering and affliction in this series is that **God has a purpose in it**. And that purpose is to bring out **the patient endurance** of his people for the sake of his name; and through that to **test and prove and refine the reality of faith** and allegiance to Christ; and through that sense of *having been approved* to **strengthen and deepen** and intensify our **hope**.

We have ministry goals as a church, we have an overarching vision for this church, we have supported and sent missionaries into our world; we have made great strides into our neighbourhood by running programs for teens and children, and it has not been easy. But there has been relatively little, if any persecution or suffering involved. We need to expect this to change; we need to understand that Biblically, we are called to suffer for the sake of the Gospel, and we need to be ready – and willing – to pay that price. Because suffering is a part of what it means to be a Christian, and a part of spreading the Gospel. But we must also keep in mind that God has a purpose for every obstacle and every frustration and every pain and every affliction, and that purpose is as important as the goals themselves—your **perseverance**, your **proven character**, and your **hope in the glory of God**.

Whatever else God may be doing at the planning level of our life, this he is always doing at the heart level of your life. And so let us with Paul exult in the hope of glory and also in the tribulations that are coming.

Prayer

Lord God and heavenly Father, thank you for sending Jesus to die on the cross on our behalf, and more than that, for his willingness to suffer for us, to show us that suffering is the lot of all disciples who would follow after Christ and take up their crosses daily, as He commands.

Lord Jesus, you who loved us so much, have warned us that suffering is a part of what it means to belong to you, to live for you, and to serve you. Help us not to run from suffering, but to seek your strength and grace in the midst of it, and help us also to understand that there is a purpose in this suffering: to bring out our patient endurance, to test and prove the reality of our faith and allegiance to you, and to deepen and strengthen our hope in you, in your love, and in your imminent return.

We are willing, Lord, to suffer for you, even as you suffered for us. Only strengthen us and encourage us in this lifestyle and mindset of serving and suffering, that you might receive all the glory and honour that is due your Name. Amen.